



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Breaking Open the Word
Mary Birmingham

23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time | Year B



James Tissot, "Jesus Heals the Deaf Mute"



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1: Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy. (Found in your parish Sacramentary.)

Option 2: Use the prayer provided below.

*To The Heart of Jesus
(By Blessed Miguel Pro, S.J.)*

Does our life become from day to day more painful,
more oppressive, more replete with sufferings?

Blessed be He a thousand times who desires it so.
If life be harder, love makes it also stronger,
and only this love, grounded on suffering,
can carry the Cross of my Lord, Jesus Christ.

I believe, O Lord, but strengthen my faith,
Heart of Jesus, I love you, but increase my love.
Heart of Jesus, I trust in you,
but give greater vigor to my confidence.

Heart of Jesus, I give my heart to you,
but so enclose it in you
that it may never be separated from you.

Heart of Jesus, I am all yours,
but take care of my promise so that I may be able
to put it in practice
even unto the complete sacrifice of my life.

**Catholic
Faith, Life
& Creed**
Version 2.0

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Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

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Sharing Faith

Liturgical Context

- ▶ Jesus opens the ears of the deaf man with a speech impediment in today's Gospel. Not only is it a healing story, and an opportunity to reflect on the sacrament of anointing of the sick, but it is also a story of witness and proclamation.
- ▶ This Gospel is the basis for one of the Holy Saturday morning preparation rites called the Ephphatha. The rite is celebrated in preparation for baptism and full initiation that will take place at the Easter Vigil later that night. The rite is celebrated in hopes that the elect have their ears and their mouth opened to hear the Word of God, proclaim it and witness to it with their lives.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?

First Reading: Isaiah 35: 4-7a

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings; simply make a statement about the reading such as:

- ▶ **This reading from the prophet Isaiah looks forward to the future day when God will send the Messiah. Healing will be a sign of his coming.**
- ▶ Today's pericope occurs in the first portion of Isaiah that was written before the exile (referred to as First Isaiah).
- ▶ While this pericope (section of reading) appears in First Isaiah, it nevertheless echoes Second Isaiah, the portion of Isaiah written after the exile.
- ▶ Second Isaiah's principle theme asserts that return from exile was God's final work of redemption.
- ▶ This reading is connected to the gospel (and thus chosen for this liturgy) for the verse that refers to healing that can be expected after the exile.
- ▶ Christianity easily appropriated Isaiah's prophetic utterances to be a foreshadowing (a type) for the future Christ event.
- ▶ The healing of which Isaiah spoke—the redemption he foretold— was fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior.
- ▶ The same word Mark used for the deaf mute in today's Gospel is the same Greek word used in this reading *mogilalon--with difficulty of speech*—thus making it a logical choice to connect it with the Gospel.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. If time allows, catechist shares from his or her own life experience.

- ▶ What is the Good News for us today in this reading?
- ▶ What is there about this reading that captures your imagination?
- ▶ Imagine what it must have been like to know that a future messiah would be coming, what would that mean for their lives in their time and in their place? What does it teach us about waiting for God's action in our lives?
- ▶ Have you ever experienced or has anyone you know ever experienced a healing of body, soul or spirit that you might describe as amazing? What does that experience teach you about God's role in our lives?
- ▶ In what way are you able to relate this reading to your own life experience?

Second Reading: James 2: 1-5

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings; simply make a statement about the reading such as:

- ▶ **The author of James exhorts his intended audience to live an obedient life in conformity with the moral imperative of the Gospel. Care for the poor is an important criterion.**
- ▶ Today's reading is the second in a five-week series in which we will hear passages from the Letter of James in the liturgy.
- ▶ As stated last week this letter is known as one of the seven general epistles or "Catholic" letters; they are not written to a specific community. It is a moral exhortation reminiscent of the wisdom books of the Old Testament. There are also echoes of Greek Stoicism, a baptismal liturgy and profession of Christian faith.
- ▶ The above influences notwithstanding, the letter is definitively Jewish in origin and was written for Jewish Christians.
- ▶ While debate abounds, it is widely believed that James was the leader of the Jerusalem church. There is also a possibility that James was a pseudonym, or a ghost-writer and interpreter of James.
- ▶ Today's reading is an exhortation regarding care for the poor—God's anawim. In order to remain faithful to the covenant God forged with his people, the poor must be cared for; it is an absolute moral imperative.
- ▶ *Matters of justice* are threads that consistently run through the entire Old Testament corpus.
- ▶ There is more insistence on caring for the poor in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. The reason for this is logical. The primary intended audience of the New Testament is poor peasant farmers who were at the mercy of the

imperial ruling class.

- ▶ Thus, there is less focus on caring for the poor in the New Testament because the majority of readers were poor themselves.
- ▶ The Letter of James, however, was intended for rich and poor alike.
- ▶ James understood care for the poor to be integral to the gospel.
- ▶ Jewish people (and every Christian believer of that day) would thoroughly understand this principle to be rooted in the covenant God forged with his people in the Garden. God promised to be in intimate, reciprocal relationship with his people. God would uphold his part by caring for and providing for his people. The people would do their part by living a righteous life and caring for those who could not take care of themselves—widows, orphans and the poor (hesed—love--the heart of biblical justice).
- ▶ James' moral exhortation assumes that those who have the means have a responsibility to help those who do not.
- ▶ The poor are to be treated with equal dignity to that of their wealthier counterparts always, but most especially in liturgical celebrations.
- ▶ Baptism offers the poor an exalted status in the reign of God. The poor are the first heirs of the kingdom.
- ▶ Unfair treatment of one member or class of members in the kingdom over another is not in the spirit and heart of the Gospel. All possess equal dignity.
- ▶ James makes sure he is not misunderstood by providing a concrete example. He cites the worshipping assembly and insists that the wealthier members are not to be given deference.
- ▶ The implications are clear: if we celebrate and worship God in liturgy with values antithetical to the gospel, then how can we expect to live moral, righteous lives each and every day of our lives?
- ▶ The way in which Christian communities welcome the poor in their midst will be a mirror into the way in which that community is truly a living witness of the Gospel.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. If time allows, catechist shares from his or her own life experience.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ What is your response when you see a homeless person on the street?
- ▶ What would be your response if you were to see that same homeless person given a place of honor in your worshipping assembly?
- ▶ What is society's response to the homeless and poor in their midst?
- ▶ Who are the homeless on your streets? What do we, as a Christian community, do to serve their needs?

- ▶ In what way are you or your community a living witness to the Gospel in your neighborhood or community?
- ▶ In what way, if any, can you relate to the teaching in this reading?

Gospel: Mark 7: 31-37

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

For those catechists who prefer an abbreviated interpretation of the Gospel refer to the bulleted points that follow and then choose questions for your reflection found at the end of the entire exegesis. (Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.)

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

Abbreviated treatment of the Gospel:

- ▶ A deaf man with a speech impediment came to Jesus. He begged Jesus to lay his hand on him to heal him. Jesus took him off to the side, spit in his ears and said, "ephphetha - (eff-e-tha) that is, be opened! Immediately the man could hear and he could speak plainly. Jesus ordered him not to tell anyone, however. But the more he ordered him not to talk, the more he proclaimed it. The people were amazed at the marvelous works of one who could make the deaf hear and the mute speak.
- ▶ Jesus engaged in a series of actions in this healing story. He took the man away from the gathered crowd; he pointed to his ears; he took saliva from his own mouth and touched the man's tongue with it; he looked up, sighed and proclaimed: "Be opened."
- ▶ It would seem to the casual observer that Jesus was an itinerant miracle worker that dotted the landscape at that time.
- ▶ Yet in all of his miracles he never once followed the familiar pattern of such wonder workers—he never used incantations or dramatic, ostentatious invocation of some extraordinary power or spirit.
- ▶ Jesus performed his healing miracle not to call attention to himself, but because the man desperately needed to be healed.
- ▶ Jesus seemed almost heartless when he was about to raise Lazarus from the dead. He took his time to get to him, he chided Martha as she expressed her frustration to him for not getting there in time and he wept with Mary who said the same thing Martha said to him and rather than chide her, he wept with her. Same question, different response. He responded to each according to what they needed from him at that time.
- ▶ An important truth is realized in the encounter. *Jesus gives his people what they need when they need it.* There is a reason he is called the Wonderful Counselor in the words of Isaiah.

- ▶ Jesus was personally touched by the plight of this man.
- ▶ He entered the man's space—he touched the afflicted parts of his body—his ears and his mouth. He spoke to the man in sign and symbol.
- ▶ Jesus used a language the man understood—he entered his world—he did not use words—he used signs—he respected the man's cognitive world.
- ▶ Jesus took the man away from the crowd. Rather than perform a miracle for the witness benefit of the crowd, or to illustrate his own power, he performed it for the man.
- ▶ Consider this man's world. He spent a lifetime as an ostracized outcast (people with deformities of any kind were considered outside God's favor due to their own sin or the sin of their parents and thus were considered unclean).
- ▶ He stood out in the crowd; he was a spectacle.
- ▶ No doubt he was the object of derision and ridicule.
- ▶ Jesus understood not only his condition, but also the pain and sorrow his condition caused throughout his entire life. He understood the woundedness (deeper than the actual impediment) deep within this man's broken spirit.
- ▶ Jesus refused to let him be a spectacle now—he was emotionally connected to him.
- ▶ The text tells us that Jesus uttered a deep sigh. A better translation would be “He moaned.”
- ▶ Jesus was in deep distress himself. Why?
- ▶ Jesus entered the man's world of pain, derision, and alienation. Jesus could empathize with the utter sense of pain and futility.
- ▶ Why is there such deep emotion on the part of Jesus since he knows he is about to heal him?
- ▶ Jesus' identified with the plight of this man and others like him.
- ▶ Even though this man's pain was about to be relieved, it called attention to something else going on in this text.
- ▶ As stated in the section above regarding the reading from Isaiah in which the word *moglilalos* was used (the primary reason the text was chosen to accompany the Gospel in the first place), there is a reason Mark used this word in this context.
- ▶ It is the only other time this word is used in the entire Bible. There is no question Mark was pointing his readers to that text (Is. 35:5). Why?
- ▶ Isaiah tells the people not to worry, to be strong and that God will come with divine retribution; God is coming to save his people. You will know when that time arrives by the signs God will use to herald this momentous event—the blind will see, the deaf will hear and the mute will speak.
- ▶ The full implications of where Jesus' mission was heading became ultimately apparent to him as he healed the deaf-mute man. Salvation history was coming full circle.
- ▶ He would take the man's place; he would be trading places with him very shortly. Soon he would be standing in for every wounded, broken, sin-racked, powerless person who ever lived. He would become the object of scorn and derision, he would know full well and even beyond what the poor man who stood before him knew—people would spit on him, call him names, strip him naked, betray

him, abandon him and mock him into oblivion.

- ▶ He could see his immediate future in the poor man who stood before him begging for compassion and healing, knowing full well there would be no one to offer it to him when the time of fulfillment would arrive.

This brings the abbreviated interpretation to a close. Refer to the questions at the end of the entire exegesis and choose the appropriate questions for your reflection.

Further elaboration of the Gospel:

The following exegesis is provided for your further and continued reflection.

- ▶ In addition to the above material there are several other interesting elements in this Gospel for our reflection.
- ▶ The geography of this Gospel—the district of Tyre...by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis... tells us that Jesus is taking his mission to the Gentiles. Galilee is the home of Gentiles.
- ▶ Galilee is the place where universal salvation was offered to the Gentile world.
- ▶ Galilee is the primary locus of Jesus' ministry.
- ▶ Jesus called the first apostles, preached his Gospel and healed his way through the local environs of Galilee.
- ▶ Galilee is the locus of Jesus' expected return.
- ▶ When Jesus took the man off to the side the reader is immediately alerted that God's manifestation is about to be revealed; "Readers, be aware, watch and listen!" Mark used such literary techniques to alert his readers that God was about to act or that an epiphany was about to occur.
- ▶ It was not uncommon for Greek and Hebrew healers to use spittle when engaging in healing rituals.
- ▶ Jesus, however, used the common gesture as a sign of his saving power—the heart and essence of our sacramental signs and symbols today.
- ▶ We are told that Jesus looked heavenward—thus allowing us access to the intimate union between Jesus and his Father. Mark tells us that Jesus looked up to heaven—he invites us into Jesus' intimate relationship with his Father.
- ▶ Jesus' action of using saliva on the man's tongue and his accompanying words have been part of the baptismal ritual since the early days of Christianity.
- ▶ Even though Jesus asked the bystanders not to tell what they just witnessed, his action alone was witness enough and could not be contained.
- ▶ His action embodied the anticipated Messianic reign of God and ultimately the Good News of God's saving power. It was a sign of that the reign of God was upon them.
- ▶ Jesus used customary healing actions of his day when he laid hands upon those whom he healed, and when he used spittle. He also healed through his word alone.
- ▶ Spittle is a significant element in Jesus' healing ministry. Spittle was understood as a common antidote against the power of evil spirits or persons who cast an evil eye upon another individual. Spit was believed to counteract the demonizing

power of evil against the poor victim.

- ▶ Ancient healing tacticians used spittle to ward off evil spirits.
- ▶ Mark places Jesus' actual Aramaic words in his mouth to cast out the spirit. When words were translated into another language it was believed that the word lost its original inherent power. Thus, for all generations to come, the text would be proclaimed in the original language of the event: "ephphatha, be opened."
- ▶ Some scholars suggest that Jesus' command not to tell anyone about the miracle as just one more messianic secret—a tool used by evangelists to illustrate Jesus' need to control the spread of his news until the time of fulfillment.
- ▶ Other scholars suggest that more is going on here. First the people would not have had any idea who the expected Messiah might be or even if he was among them.
 - The messiah they expected was not the Messiah that arrived. Few people would have jumped to the conclusion that Jesus was the one for whom they were looking.
- ▶ What was going on had more to do with the honor/shame culture of Jesus' day.
- ▶ To proclaim Jesus Messiah meant that Jesus was being exalted beyond his cultural status—a taboo in that intensely honor-shame based culture.
- ▶ No one was allowed to rise above his or her ordinary, every day birth status.
- ▶ Jesus' honor depended on keeping the healing of the deaf mute out of public scrutiny.
- ▶ In order to protect the social status and thus the honor of Jesus' family required that the healing event remain hidden from view—for now.
- ▶ Jesus restored the man to full life in the community—in and of itself a more important factor than the healing itself.
- ▶ All people who approached Jesus were healed—all experienced spiritual healing or were restored to full life and life in the community.
- ▶ A few people were cured—their physical disease was completely healed and totally cured. Healing, in that culture, was more important than the cure.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to ONE or MORE appropriate questions (as time allows) in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface their insights in the wider group. Catechist responds by sharing his or her own experience. See appendix for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What is the Good News in the Gospel?
- ▶ What is the lesson in this Gospel?
- ▶ What are the primary themes in this Gospel?
- ▶ In what way if any, can this story speak to us today?

- ▶ What are the implications inherent in the fact that this story took place in Galilee? What is the lesson hidden in that one geographical detail?
- ▶ Who are the outcast victims in today's society? What is your response to such people when you see them on the street? What is your community's response to such people?
- ▶ How do you feel about the fact that in Jesus' day it was more important to be spiritually healed or restored to full life in the community than it was to be cured? Do you believe that everyone who comes to Jesus is healed even though they may not be cured? What does that mean to you?
- ▶ In what way, if any, is Jesus' response to the man—the way in which he ministered to him—good news for you? In what way, if any, does your relationship with Jesus reflect the loving compassion he showed to the man he healed?
- ▶ What does this Gospel teach us about how we should respond to the sick, the suffering, the poor, and the disenfranchised in our own world? How did Jesus respond to the man in this story? What did he teach us about how we should respond in similar fashion?
- ▶ Beyond the obvious healing in this story, what else did it reveal? Does Jesus' same salvific healing take place in our world? In what way have you experienced or heard or known about such healing? What does it teach us about God's plan for the salvation of the world?
- ▶ Why was Jesus in distress and where does this story lead? What are the implications for us as disciples? (i.e. living the Paschal Mystery)
- ▶ In what way, if any does this Gospel challenge a behavior or attitude in your life?
- ▶ In what way does this Gospel invite us to be better disciples?

Catechist invites participants to reflect on the following question in the group or in their journal.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

Concluding Prayer

PRAYER of BLESSED GIANNA BERETTA MOLLA

O Jesus, I promise you to submit myself
to all that you permit to befall me,
make me only know your will.
My most sweet Jesus,
infinitely merciful God,
most tender Father of souls,
and in a particular way of the most weak,
most miserable,
most infirm which you carry with special tenderness
between your divine arms,
I come to you to ask You,
through the love and merits of your Sacred Heart,
the grace to comprehend and to do always your holy will,
the grace to confide in you,
the grace to rest securely
through time and eternity
in your loving divine arms.

OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

- Who are the outcast victims in today's society? What is your response to such people when you see them on the street? What is your community's response to such people?

It is easy to look on our streets and see who the outcasts are. They are dirty, disheveled, and homeless. No matter the reason they have been unable to live normally in society. Many of the people are drug addicts or alcoholics but most of them are mentally ill. They are as reviled today as the sick people of Jesus' day. They are just as excluded from society as the outcast of Jesus' Gospel.

A young mentally ill man recently spent a month in jail for opening a beer can in a city park. He was beaten by inmates in jail and put in solitary confinement for that entire month because of his lack of hygiene. He is on the streets in the first place because of unjust laws and the fact that local governments simply do not want to pay for the services or facilities that will help and house such unfortunate people. Thus, the local jail has become the new hospital to house the mentally ill.

We look past them when we see them on the street and can hardly see the face of Christ in their faces. We judge them as unwilling to work and lacking in basic human responsibility. I could be one of those complacent people who look beyond the broken faces and perhaps all too often do. Jesus, however, not only encountered and engaged the man, he became one with him. He knew he was about to endure what this poor man had endured all his life. He had a personal connection with him.

I am opened to the plight of society's most forgotten population because I too have a personal connection—a family connection. My own experience and the experience of Jesus in the Gospel is a reminder to me to never turn a blind eye—to be aware—to offer compassion and uphold human dignity when it would be too easy to look past what I see and let it be someone else's problem.

Today's Gospel is a clarion call to all of us to wake up and reach out to the broken in our midst instead of judging them unclean and unfit for our presence. It is a huge challenge.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 35: 4-7a | James 2: 1-5 | Mark 7: 31-37

Catholic Social teaching
Stewardship
Ecumenism
Morality

Moral Decision Making
Anointing of the Sick
Sacrament of Reconciliation
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

James insists in today's second reading that the wealthier members of the community should care for the less advantaged since baptism extends to them a privileged place. Thus it is appropriate that we focus our doctrinal session on CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING.

STEWARDSHIP

James insists in today's second reading that the wealthier members of the community should care for the less advantaged since baptism extends to them a privileged place. Thus it compels us to remember the poor when it comes to the distribution of our resources. Good stewardship requires that we care for the poor. Thus it is appropriate that we focus our doctrinal session on CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING.

ECUMENISM

Mark's story of Jesus healing the man with a spirit takes place in Galilee. Galilee is the place of the gentiles—where they were invited into the household of faith. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about ECUMENISM.

MORALITY

James heralds a morality in which the poor hold a privileged place. Living the moral life is a sign of living the covenant. We know that because Jesus is present in the church, the church is driven to act morally. This motivates the community's response to God and one another. It is thus important to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about Christian MORALITY.

MORAL DECISION MAKING

James heralds a morality in which the poor hold a privileged place. Living the moral life is a sign of living the covenant. We know that because Jesus is present in the church, the church is driven to act morally. This motivates the community's response to God and one another. It is thus important to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about Christian MORAL DECISION MAKING.

ANOINTING OF THE SICK

Jesus heals the man with an unclean spirit. His entire ministry was one of healing and reconciliation. He not only healed the man but he restored him to the community. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the SACRAMENT OF ANOINTING OF THE SICK.

SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

In today's gospel, Jesus heals the man with an unclean spirit. His entire ministry was one of healing and reconciliation. He not only healed the man but he restored him to the community. So it is with the sacrament of reconciliation. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. This week we continue the series on the Mass. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.